

By William M. Birenbaum

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Forward to the Basics

Colleges and universities must
confront the future on its own
terms, not those of the past

THIS IS A TIME of growing reaction throughout American higher education: reaction against forces influential in reshaping our institutions since World War II, from the GI Bill of Rights to the tremendous expansion of public and private facilities, massive student financial-aid programs, the rise of the community colleges, and such experiments as open admissions at the City University of New York.

Foremost among these forces is the democratization of access to the campuses—the fact that millions of Americans heretofore excluded from higher education have found their way in. Equally compelling has been the new linkage between the great social, political, and economic forces in society at large and the educational and administrative conduct of the colleges and universities—what a leading editorial in the *Washington Post* last spring described with disapprobation as the intrusion or distraction of “real world issues like Vietnam and various community causes.”

A murky economic and cultural atmosphere accommodates the reaction. Inflation and the attitudinal and value disarray at its heart both dampen the spirit of adventure and hasten the flight into the bomb-shelters of tradition.

The battle cry of the reaction is “Back to the Basics.” This battle cry assumes that what once was “basic” (whatever that was), still is. It also assumes that existing delivery systems may now best address the future.

In higher education, the “Back to the Basics” movement takes several forms: the stiffening of accrediting standards; the legislative proposals in several states to exclude or limit the operations of out-of-state institutions in an effort to shore up overexpanded domestic public monopolies and private systems; the discouragement of curricular experimentation; pressures to redistribute student financial-aid funds from the poorer to middle-income students; the retreat of corporate and foundation philanthropy from more adventuresome front lines to safer objectives in the heartlands of tradition.

There are connections between the troubles many colleges and universities are now experiencing and the quality and effectiveness of their delivery systems. These problems not only beset many of the smaller, private institutions whose backs are obviously against the wall. They also pervade many of the most prestigious of the institutional fat-cats, public and private, whose layers of fat may still cover up inefficiency, bureaucratic bungling and waste, and an attitude of business-as-usual. Perhaps many of our colleges and universities do not deserve to be rescued. We need to develop policies to help us distinguish those institutions worthy of a future from those no longer capable of serving the future.

GIVEN THE GROWING COMPLEXITY and number of serious unresolved problems in our country, it is difficult to maintain that we are now an overeducated population, wallowing in a superabundance of know-how and problem-solving talent. Miseducated or uneducated, perhaps; but certainly not overeducated.

We are moving into a new decade in which the tensions between the poor and the less poor and between the younger and older adults in our country are likely to become more acute. We have shaped an economy characterized by a significant shift from the production of manufactured goods to the demand for and the provision of greater professional, human, and technical services. More and more of the economic and political decisions affecting the daily lives of our people are necessarily transitional in character. Among the so-called hard-core unem-

ployed young, and the underutilized talents represented by a growing senior citizenry, lies a formidable challenge to discover new ways to release productively the energy of a large part of our population.

Never before has the relationship between formal education and the problem-solving arenas in the world of work been more vital. Never before has the opportunity to combine the best of our human talents with the most sophisticated technology for education now available been so great.

Alvin Toffler has suggested that “Forward to the Basics” is an appropriate commitment for our educators to make. How can we best move forward to the basics? How can we reshape delivery systems so that they are not only more effective and responsive to the future-oriented needs of our people, but are able to define and address those essential problems and capacities for knowledge basic to the future?

Here are some suggestions.

► The configuration of human and technical talents to be mobilized often transcends the jurisdictions of formal educational institutions. In a great city like New York there is more basic research in disciplines like economics and chemistry occurring in non-academic institutions than in all of the city’s universities taken together. The best talents in a traditional academic field like art history—and in the performing arts and technology as well—are not to be found in the universities. Moreover, neither the ages nor the needs of the people seeking further education necessarily conform to the rigid jurisdictional lines traditionally drawn between secondary and collegiate institutions. Programs ought to be started that reward the mobilization of human talent and technical resources across existing institutional lines, encouraging collaboration among colleges, universities, hospitals, museums, libraries, and private industrial, commercial, and financial corporations, as well as between lower and higher educational systems.

► Federal policy should recognize that research-and-development in higher education is unique because it often takes the form of trial-and-error programmatic effort. The program is itself the laboratory, and without support for the program effort there is no research. In educational programmatic efforts the *process* often, indeed usually, is as critical as the content. Federal policies that insist upon the replicability of research results need to be

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re-examined. Enlarged efforts in support of programmatic experimentation, of the kind often encouraged by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, ought to be undertaken.

► The further development of the relationship between formal education and the world of work through cooperative and internship programs is essential. Many existing programs do little more than move people back and forth between the two arenas. Programs ought to be encouraged that explore more deeply the educational potentials in the places of work, and the implications of the work experience for the curricular framework on the campuses. For the same reasons that such experiences are valuable for the students, they are potentially of tremendous value for the teachers and for the supervisors of the students in the places of work. Cooperative and internship exchanges for faculty members and corporate executives also ought to be developed. Finally, it is difficult to champion the work ethic among the younger workers if they are paid less than older co-workers for equal production.

► Assuming that several colleges will close during the decade ahead, while others may successfully make the transition necessary in order to endure, new legislation is required. The federal bankruptcy laws were not made with the eleemosynary institution in mind. Moreover, it is doubtful that the supervision of federal courts is either desirable or appropriate in the reorganization or termination of non-profit educational institutions.

► Federal policy should encourage, even compel, the states to develop coherent plans for the better rationalization of their public and private systems for higher education. On one hand, these plans should promote better coordination of resources; on the other, they should reward successful competition and innovation.

► The national government itself ought to clarify its policies and supply greater organizational leadership in the decade ahead, as we move from declining and failing educational delivery systems to new institutional forms and designs.

THE GLOOMY FORECASTS of demographic and other experts are cast within the terms of the *status quo*. The question is not whether the college has a future. The American population will continue to grow. The most challenging agenda to confront any people in history confronts us today. The need for sophisticated educational effort is unprecedented. The issue is whether our genius can invent educational institutions and systems equal to the challenge. I am optimistic.

Antioch's original President, Horace Mann, foresaw the inescapable connection between the education of our people and their capacity to participate in the economic promise of America. At the same time, he re-emphasized the Jeffersonian principle that only a well-educated people could conduct the political experiment of democracy. What Congressman Morrill accomplished with land-grant legislation was a uniquely American response to a uniquely American situation. The community colleges have been an equally novel invention. History may set the terms for the future, but the lessons it teaches are no substitute for confronting the future on its own terms. This is a time for adventure and invention. Gloom-and-doom are not only un-American; they are clumsy and inappropriate tools with which to achieve the future.

William M. Birenbaum is president of Antioch University.